

Using Children's Books & Stories: An Expansion of the Conscience Group Curriculum

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Julia Bradshaw, MSW

For many years now, the youth in residence at Children's Bureau, Inc. Retreat Program have participated in a conscience sensitive group therapy with Dr. Galvin, the consulting psychiatrist and this therapist. Originally, what we called Conscience Group had been conducted every week spanning the months of fall and winter. In brief, the developers of the original curriculum envisioned interactive conscience tasks that would afford opportunities for group participants to explore each of the five domains of conscience in turn. In our work with children and adolescents, we have called the five domains: *moral imagination*, *moral connections*, *moral emotional responsiveness*, *moral values* and *moral choosing*. [A full description of the original curriculum for this therapeutic modality is contained in Galvin, M., Gaffney, M. and Stilwell, B. (2005): Preliminary observations and reflections on conscience sensitive group therapy. In Conscience Works, an On-line Periodical, Theory, Research and Clinical Application, 2(2): 1-23., which can be readily accessed on the website Conscience Works at <https://conscienceworks.iu.edu.>]

While I really liked what we accomplished with the original Conscience Group curriculum, I wanted two things more. First, I wanted some way to assess how well the residents grasped what had been taught, processed and learned. Second, I wanted additional ways in which the children and adolescents could creatively express what they had begun to bring inside them.

In recent years, I conceived of using versions of therapeutic narrative to expand the Conscience Group work. It seemed to me that story-telling and drawing would accomplish both of the things I wanted. I shared my vision with Dr. Galvin who was eager for me to put my ideas into practice. We talked about the mutual story telling technique as it had been described by Richard Gardner long ago. We talked about therapeutic metaphor. We talked about efforts that had been made in various elementary schools in which children would work with parent-volunteers to produce original children's books. The ideas I was hatching would eventually result in extending our group time from six to nine months out of every year, but would still allow the three months of summer for turnover of most of the population in residence.

I began by using psycho-educational books for children (some of which had been authored or co-authored by Dr. Galvin; visit [Open Library](#) for a partial list). Soon, however, I moved out of the genre of psycho-educational books and selected from children's books that had appealed to me over the years. I had a great time going to the library and finding old as well as new titles. I prepared my own question sets and drawing tasks for each story that I thought would elicit a conscience sensitive response. Each week, I asked one group member to read the story aloud to the group but to pause at appointed times to allow the other group members to draw responsively. How each child or adolescent completed the task was left up to their own moral imaginations. Group members became very engaged in the drawings that reflected some of their own conscience functioning, their individualized treatment issues and how the five conscience domains had been interwoven into their lives emotionally, cognitively and behaviorally. In due

course, we began discussing aspects of creating children's books. They were curious regarding everything about the process: 'Can the author be the illustrator too?' 'How many pictures for how many words?', 'How should the cover look?', 'What is this copyright stuff about?', 'What is an acknowledgement?' (which often led to skill building in moral emotional responsiveness by practicing yet another form of expressing gratitude), and 'Tell us more about dedications.'

After that, they were ready for the next step: to write and illustrate their own children's books complete with plot, characters, dialogue and, of course, a moral to their story. The only requirement I insisted on was that they utilize one or more of the conscience domains. This expansion of the Conscience Group was well received by the residents. They improved their grasp of the concepts of conscience. For some residents who incorporated their own therapeutic issues or personal conscience development into the creation of the books there followed tremendous self-disclosure and therapeutic work. Their creativity was exceptional. The residents embraced the creation of their books in choosing appealing titles, providing forewords and understanding authorial responsibilities. As a result, residents were very proud of their work. Many were eager to share their experience and the end product in family therapy sessions as a way to connect with their family and/or just share with younger siblings. Perhaps a testament to story-telling in combination with conscience work, most residents wanted the therapist to keep their books as examples for future residents who in their turn would participate in the weekly Conscience Group.

In summary, our work with residential youth in conscience sensitive individual, group and family therapy has positive impact. The addition of guiding them through the creation of healing stories makes residents even more aware of how they can engage their conscience not only throughout the therapeutic process but also in creative activity. They are stirred to see how moral imagination can be called upon in their everyday lives. It has become one of the highlights in my work as a therapist.

-- Julia Bradshaw, MSW

Editor's Note: Ms Julia Bradshaw holds a Masters degree in Social Work. She is a veteran psychotherapist who has conducted individual, family and group psychotherapies in the Rachel Glick Courage House Retreat residential program of Children's Bureau Incorporated in Indianapolis, Indiana. She has been affiliated with the Conscience Project in refining conscience sensitive group psychotherapy for more than ten years. When not devoting herself to children and adolescents who have endured adverse life circumstances in Indianapolis, during her vacation time, Ms Bradshaw can often be found on missions to Haiti and Honduras.